

SWAHILI FORUM 18 (2011): 3-4

IN MEMORIAM
IRMI MARAL-HANAK
18. 2. 1967 - 27. 8. 2011

We mourn the untimely death of our dear colleague and friend Irmi Maral-Hanak. Irmi died on 27th August 2011 after a long illness at the age of 44 years.

Already as a young person, Irmi was characterised by her open mind, great interest and genuine empathy towards people's life circumstances as well as her alertness against authority. As a 16-year-old student she stayed in Kenya for several months which made a lasting impression on her. East-Africa was to remain at the centre of her social commitment and scientific interest. In the summer of 1985, shortly before she started to study at the University of Vienna, Irmi participated in a project in Northern Tanzania and visited Austrian development projects in Kenya.

In autumn 1985 Irmi began her studies at the Department of African Studies at the University of Vienna. She could have boasted with her experiences and first-hand knowledge about Africa but she did not, not in the beginning of her career and not later on. Right from the beginning, Irmi combined in her studies her interests in language (Swahili) and East African society and history as well as her critical approach to development policy. She earned her first degree (diploma) with a socio-historical thesis on the biography of a Tanzanian female politician. In the following years, Irmi worked on her doctoral dissertation "Court, Language, Power" which was published in 1994. Her research in Zanzibar was dedicated to the analysis of communicative processes during court hearings at the Islamic Family Court in Zanzibar. Participatory observation, transcripts from negotiations at court and intensive interviews with experts served as the empirical basis for a thoroughly stimulating and scientifically innovative study. In her work she showed that women can assert their rights better in a non-western/non-colonized rights system; at the same time it became visible how much of an impact social status and economic security had on the extent to which women could secure their rights.

Irmi's scientific engagement with issues of power, control and resistance in and through communication lasted for two decades. Through the analysis of verbal communication, Irmi disclosed processes of inequality. By doing so, she also revealed ways to overcome such asymmetries. Gender was always in focus, in addition to north-south-relations, especially in with the context of development cooperation. Through two subsequent projects „Communication and Development“, and „Communication and Consulting“, both financed by the Austrian Science Foundation (FWF), she had the opportunity to realise her research goals during the 1990s. From the mid-1990s on, Irmi regularly participated in the Swahili-

Colloquium, which had become an institution in Bayreuth. Her interest in “marketing” her research results was never as great as her efforts to make her results available to practitioners in development cooperation and her students. Irmi was an active member of the Working Group on Applied African Studies, of the editorial committee of the Austrian Journal of Development Policy (JEP), and she was a founding member of the department’s journal *Stichproben. Vienna Journal of African Studies*, which was launched in 2001.

In 1991, Irmi had started to teach courses in Swahili and in Applied Linguistics. From the late 1990s on she contributed to the curriculum design of the section of development cooperation of the new study programme on development studies. Teaching became her profession and she developed an impressive collection of innovative teaching materials.

For her own research project she was given a habilitation grant by the Austrian Science Foundation, and her thesis on “Language, discourse and participation: studies in donor-driven development in Tanzania” was published in 2009. As part of her study she investigated the importance of language preferences within selected development projects in Tanzania. Especially the choice of English over Swahili by the actors involved results in an asymmetric relationship as those people who should be in the centre of the process are largely excluded from information and decision making processes.

A new chapter in her career started with her appointment as Associate Professor for African Studies and Development Studies in 2009; she was now also increasingly responsible for the supervision of graduate students and young staff members. She had new opportunities to realize her ideas for cooperation within and outside of the University of Vienna. Sadly, she only had little time left to fulfil this role which she enjoyed so much. We are deeply indebted to her for her great dedication to the department, students and colleagues. Irmi always managed to combine her interest in the world, her research and teaching with her dedication to students, friends and family. Since 2003 she had been married to Ertürk Maral, and had two daughters. Our thoughts are with her family.

A longer, German version of the obituary has been published in *Stichproben. Vienna Journal of African Studies*, No. 21. This number of *Stichproben* is entirely dedicated to the memory of Irmi Maral-Hanak and her scientific work. It is online available at www.univie.ac.at/ecco/stichproben and contains a selection of Irmi Maral-Hanak’s publications. The obituary was shortened and translated into English by Birgit Englert.